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ISAAC ERTER: A MODERN HEBREW
HUMOURIST.

“How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” Such were the sorrowful words uttered by the Jewish exiles when, sitting by the streams of Babylon, they were asked by their conquerors to sing some of the beautiful songs of Zion. And, indeed, how could those captives be expected to tune their national harp in presence of a mocking enemy, who had caused them so much grief and affliction, and had apparently also put an end to the further development of their sacred literature? But, happily, times changed later on for the better, and, with the regeneration of the Jewish nationality during the period of the Second Temple, there arose in the midst of the Jewish people poets and minstrels, who drew new sounds from the harp of Zion which were full of charm and sweetness. Of this, several Psalms composed at that time give conclusive evidence.

A similar revival of Hebrew literature took place during part of the Middle Ages in Spain and Italy, when it was enriched with several beautiful specimens of Hebrew prose and poetry, written and composed by the representatives of the so-called Spanish and Italian School. In modern times, too, a regeneration of the same literature has been effected in Galicia, a country which forms part of the Austrian Empire. During the first half of the present century there flourished in that country an able band of writers of Hebrew prose and poetry, who may be regarded as the founders of what is now termed the Galician School. The most able representative of that school is Dr. Isaac

Erter, the subject of the present essay. The following short sketch of Erter's life will, perhaps, be found interesting, especially as it will afford some insight into the spiritual life of the Galician Jews of the past generation.

Isaac Erter was born in the year 1792, in a small Galician village called Janischock. His father, a poor innkeeper, had to endure a life-long struggle against poverty and want, but, in spite of this, he did not neglect to have his son instructed in Hebrew and Talmudical lore. When young Erter had made some good progress in these subjects—which, by the way, he only learnt mechanically and without any fixed plan or method—his father caused him to marry a Rabbi's daughter, who, however, died within the first year after her marriage. Far from feeling discouraged by that sad experience, old Erter soon insisted upon his son marrying another girl of tender age, but, fortunately, the second marriage proved a most happy one; for his second wife was a genial and most pleasant companion to him in all the vicissitudes of his career, and encouraged him to endeavour to obtain for himself an honourable position in life in which effort he was ultimately most successful. But in the meantime he had to suffer all those troubles and vexations which a married man without any definite means of a livelihood is bound to undergo, and, in order to forget them for awhile, he frequently mixed with the members of a strange religious sect, known by the name of "Chassidim." The chief characteristics of this peculiar people may be said to consist in their leading a life of hilarity and excitement, and in being passionately devoted to their spiritual leader, called Rebbe. Although such Rebbes are as a rule most ignorant and illiterate persons, they are, nevertheless, held in high estimation by their devotees, who credit them with the possession of supernatural powers, by means of which they are able to work miracles. But, after a time, Erter became disgusted with the loathsome practices of the sect and their leaders,

and leaving the whole fraternity altogether, he went to live in Lemberg, the capital of Galicia. There he soon associated with several young men of talent and culture, who interested themselves on his behalf, and procured for him pupils whom he instructed in Hebrew and religious subjects. They also made him acquainted with the works of Maimonides and Mendelssohn, to the study of which he subsequently devoted many of his leisure hours. For three years (from 1813 to 1816) Erter led a comparatively happy life, and enjoyed the society and friendship of some genial spirits among whom may particularly be mentioned, Rapoport, the subsequent Chief Rabbi of Prague, and Nachman Krochmal, the renowned Hebrew scholar and philosopher. But his dream of happiness did not last long. For, when Jacob Ornstein, the then Chief Rabbi of Lemberg, heard of the existence among his flock of a small and youthful band occupied with the study of secular subjects, he became alarmed, and in order to put a stop to such an ungodly practice, forthwith excommunicated all the supposed culprits. This unexpected action had a crushing effect upon poor Erter, who was thereby deprived of his pupils, the only means of his subsistence. Under these circumstances, Erter's longer stay in Lemberg was out of the question, and he consequently decided to settle in the neighbouring town of Brody. On his arrival there, he met with a hearty reception from the enlightened section of the community, and as a new Jewish school had just been inaugurated there, he was entrusted with its management. After a short time, however, he resigned his position, and made up his mind to prepare himself for a more independent calling. With that object in view Erter left his already grown-up family of daughters in charge of some kind and obliging friends, and went to Buda-Pesth, at the University of which town he intended to prepare himself for the medical profession. He was then thirty-three years old, had neither money nor friends to assist him in his most venturous undertaking, and yet—wonderful

to relate—he attained his object. After five years' hard study during which time he endured the greatest misery and privation imaginable, he succeeded in passing all the necessary examinations, and, having taken his medical degree, he soon after began practising in some small Galician town. Now, it so happened that at that time the cholera was raging most severely in some parts of the country, and as Erter displayed considerable skill in dealing with the epidemic, he drew upon himself the attention of the Austrian Government, which entrusted him with the task of preparing certain essays, treating of the origin and spread of contagious diseases. Ultimately he returned to Brody, and continued to practise his new calling, making himself especially popular among the poor, who found in him a kindly benefactor. His leisure time he devoted, just as he had done in previous years, to his favourite occupation, viz., the composition of essays, or rather satires, on Jewish subjects. These satires he usually sent to his literary friends, to be read and criticised, before allowing them to be printed in the current Hebrew periodicals. Among those friends he reckoned, in addition to Rapoport and Krochmal, Professor S. D. Luzatto, Salom Cohen (editor of the Hebrew periodical *Bikure Ha-Itim*), and Dr. Letteris, the subsequent editor and publisher of Erter's collected writings under the title of *הצופה לבית ישראל*.¹

The last years of Erter's life were again visited by various hard trials, chiefly caused by the untimely death of his two married daughters, to whom he had been deeply attached. He did not survive them long, but died peacefully in 1851 during the Feast of Passover, being deeply mourned by the poor and a large circle of intimate friends.

From what has hitherto been said, it will be seen that Erter's life was passed amidst much agitation. To this very circumstance, however, may be attributed the existence of

¹ Vienna, 1858 ; Second Edition, 1864.

the excellent Hebrew satires contained in the *Ha-Zophe*. The sad experiences of the author during the early part of his married state, the life he had led among the "Chassidim," the treatment he had received at the hands of the Chief Rabbi of Lemberg, and, finally, the observations he had made in his capacity as a medical practitioner—all these and many other things are most graphically described in that little volume. The style in which these descriptions are couched is full of humour and sarcasm, and they possess the true mark of excellence, inasmuch as familiarity with them adds to their attractiveness. Erter also wrote some poetical pieces, but they bear no comparison with his masterly prose, which, as Graetz well says, has points of resemblance with that of Heine.

The titles of the satires in question are: 1. מאזני משקל; 2. מקארלסבאד בשובו; 3. הצופה בשובו; 4. גלגול נפש; 5. תשל"ך; 6. חסידות וחכמה; and each section treats of a different subject. It would be no easy task for anyone to reproduce in English, or in any other language, the many beauties of form and style found in the original Hebrew of those essays. Equally difficult would it be to arrange the pieces in order of merit, since each has a peculiar fascination of its own. But the following free translation of some parts of the essay, entitled *גלגול נפש* (Transmigration of the Soul) may, perhaps, give the reader a faint idea of Erter's style and mode of writing. The essay begins as follows:—

"I am a physician, and it is my duty to heal wounds, and to procure a remedy for every disease of the body. It is true that those of my colleagues who can boast of possessing high titles, look down upon me with a certain contempt, inasmuch as they think that they alone have a right to speak with authority of things they do not know much about. But, nevertheless, I am as well qualified a medical practitioner as they are, and my patients do not fare worse than theirs. The only difference between them and myself is, perhaps, to be found in the fact that they drive to their patients' houses in splendid carriages, while I visit mine on foot. For, the more horses and carriages a physician has, the more knowledge and medical skill is attributed to

him by the members of the Jewish faith. Moreover, such distinguished and high-titled physicians, who are mostly employed by the wealthy classes of the community, are generally handsomely rewarded for their services, even when their patients have died an untimely death, for among the rich even death is an expensive affair. But I, whose chief practice is carried on among the poor, do seldom get any pay for my services, and if any of those poor people should die, then his or her soul 'goes out free for nothing.' Once I passed before the house in which one of my patients had recently died. He did not die quite suddenly, but had been ill for some time, and I was called in to prescribe for his illness. That patient happened to be well off, and after I had visited him once or twice, and he continued ailing, there came a great multitude of his female neighbours and relatives—for the rich are always surrounded by their relatives and pretended friends—and said compassionately: 'This poor sufferer is still in bed, and shall we keep silence? Can *that* man (pointing to me) be expected to restore him to health again? Where are his horses, and where is his carriage? Let us call in some better and more skilful men, and let them have a consultation about the case.' Better and more skilful men were summoned; they arrived and examined the patient. They then nodded their wise heads, and prescribed a new medicine which, having been fetched from the apothecary's shop, was given to the patient. He took it once or twice, and was soon after 'gathered to his fathers.'"

Here follows a long and humorous description of the author's meeting with the soul of his recently departed patient. On that occasion the soul related to him the story of its many adventures during a long earthly career, how it frequently passed over from one body into another, and how it had once also been transferred from the body of an ass into that of a physician. In that capacity the soul informed the author it had prospered greatly, not on account of its cleverness and extraordinary medical skill, but because it had acted on certain practical rules which it recommended the author to be guided by in his profession.

The soul then goes on to enumerate those rules, which are as follows:—

I. "Powder your hair white, and place on the table of your study a human skull and various curious skeletons of the animal world. Those coming to you for medical advice will then say that your

hair must surely have turned white through overwork in your profession, and through the continual study that you are making in the domain of natural science. II. Fill your library with large-sized books that are richly bound in red and gold. No matter whether you ever open and read them or not, people will always have a high opinion of your great acquirements and wisdom. III. Sell and pawn everything for the sake of having a carriage of your own. Your patients may die right and left through the errors of your judgment, yet the fact of having your carriage standing and waiting outside their door will shield you from adverse criticism. IV. If called to a patient, you must pay less attention to him and to his malady than to those persons who are round about him. On leaving the sick-room, assume a grave face, and say that the case is a most critical one. Should the patient die, then you will have hinted at his death ; but if, on the other hand, he gets well again, his relations and friends will naturally attribute his recovery to your extraordinary medical skill and cleverness. V. Have as little as possible to do with the poor. For, as they will only send for you in hopeless and desperate cases, you will not gain any honour or reward by attending upon them. Be, therefore, exceedingly reserved to them, and keep them at a fair distance. Let them wait outside of your house, and those who pass by will look with amazement at the crowd waiting patiently to obtain your services. VI. Consider every medical practitioner as your natural enemy, and speak of him always with the utmost disparagement. If he happens to be young, then you must say that he has not had sufficient practice and experience, and can do no good ; and, if he is old, you must declare that either his eyesight is bad, or that he is a little crazy, and by no means to be trusted in important cases. VII. When you are asked to take part in a consultation with other physicians, then you would act wisely by always loudly protesting against the previous treatment of the case by your colleagues. Whatever the issue of that case may be, you will always be on the safe side."

In the same satire Erter speaks in by no means flattering terms of his old enemy, the Chief Rabbi of Lemberg, after having already alluded to him in similar terms in another satire, entitled: *מאונני משקל*. There he had censured that exceedingly pious Rabbi for having published a bulky commentary on the well-known code of Jewish laws, called *Shulchan Aruch*, under the title of *ישועות יעקב*, as being the production of his own pen. But Erter shows

that all which the would-be learned divine had contributed to the volume in question consisted merely in the title page, while the rest of it was in reality the work of other authors. And such a man pretended to be one of the chief representatives of ultra-orthodox Rabbinism, and to serve as a model of honesty and true piety ! But, not satisfied with this revelation of the real worth of the literary contribution made by this ecclesiastic to Jewish lore and learning, Erter seizes the opportunity offered to him in the satire *Transmigration of Souls* to refer once more to the soul of the same spiritual chief who had once caused his temporary ruin. That very soul, says Erter, made to him a full confession of its origin, and declared that it had formerly belonged to a mean, dirty-looking and ill-tempered watchdog of the lowest type. Being too dangerous an animal to be allowed to move freely round about the premises of its owner, it had to be kept chained to its kennel. There it moved fiercely to and fro, watching all the time for any passers-by ; and no sooner did it notice some one coming than it began to howl and to bark with all its power and strength, and aroused all the dogs in the neighbourhood to follow its example, the result being a tremendous and deafening noise. Woe to the person who came by chance within its reach without being provided with a powerful stick, or some other protective weapon. The watchdog would then attack him suddenly, and inflict upon him most serious wounds. But, on the other hand, the savage brute would, in spite of its pretended courage and fearlessness, retreat at once in a most cowardly manner, and crouch behind its kennel on noticing that the passer-by was well-armed, and thus able to defend himself against any attack on its part. Once upon a time that watchdog swallowed a big bone, in consequence of which it died an untimely death, but its soul continued its transmigration, and entered the body of a human being. When the latter grew up and became a man, he still retained the nature and all characteristics

peculiar to the canine species, or rather to a cowardly watchdog. Unfortunately that man thought fit to choose the Jewish ministry for his calling, and, as ill-luck would have it, succeeded ultimately in obtaining the cure or guardianship of the souls of his flock. Far from following the golden path of a true minister of the Jewish religion, who is in duty bound to promote peace and harmony in his community, he allowed himself to be guided by his canine instinct, and bullied everyone whom he happened to dislike. He thundered forth his anathemas right and left against those persons who wished to enter the portals of the temple of knowledge and wisdom, and induced his adherents to assist him in carrying out his supposed holy task. But, like his cowardly prototype, he only inflicted mortal wounds on the helpless and the unprotected ones in his community, while he did not dare to do any harm to the rich and influential members of his flock, who would not submit to his evil machinations. When this Rabbinical tyrant died, his soul, says Erter, migrated into the body of a fox, and thence it entered again in due course into the human frame of a future spiritual leader of the "Chassidim."

The Rebbe swindle, and the clever tricks of the whole fraternity of these performers of supernatural wonders form a most fruitful subject for Erter's satire, and the author recurs to them again and again in several places. In the satire under notice, Erter gets hold of the soul of such a Rebbe, and causes it to relate some of the adventures through which it had passed during its earthly career. Among other amusing stories, it also narrates an incident giving a description of a clever trick, by means of which its late owner, the Rebbe, had extricated himself from a most awkward position, and shows how he had deceived his devotees even at the time of his death.

"My own son," says the soul of the defunct Rebbe, "was once ill, and my wife, the mother of that child, came to me and asked me imploringly that I should offer prayers to God that the life of the dear

patient might be spared. 'Be not afraid,' I said to her; 'the son of God's favourite will *not* perish.' Next day, and also on the third day my wife implored me again in the name of heaven and earth that I should intercede on behalf of the poor sufferer whose illness had meanwhile taken a serious turn for the worse. But I answered, and said: 'Compose yourself, you silly little woman. I have already assured you that my son shall not die.' Later in the day my wife rushed into my room, bathed in tears, and exclaiming, 'Alas, the Lord has dealt very bitterly with me, and has taken from me my beloved child. What shall I do, and what shall my life be without that darling, the joy of my existence?'

"Now, it so happened that several of my devotees were present in my room when my wife was assured by me that her son would not die, and again when she actually informed me of the latter's death. I was thus placed in a most awkward predicament; but soon a happy thought occurred to me which helped me out of my embarrassment. I pretended to be quite amazed at the sad news, and exclaimed, 'What? am I to believe that my own son has died, and no information to that effect has reached me from heaven? No, never. You may do with my son whatever you like, but I cannot acknowledge his death till it has been officially notified to me from the world of spirits.' And when, in due course, the remains of my son were carried away to their last resting place, I did not tear my garments according to the general custom, nor did I follow the funeral procession, pretending all the time to be unaware of the fact of my son's death. But after the lapse of several days, when sitting one evening in the midst of my adherents and devotees, explaining to them some passages of the Bible in my own mysterious way, I suddenly began to cry, and to shed copious tears. 'Alas!' I exclaimed, 'now, just now, I begin to believe in my son's death, for a heavenly message has just informed me of that sorrowful event.' Soon after, I began earnestly to mourn over my son's demise, and all the people round about me looked on with amazement, and believed in me and in my holiness more firmly and more truly than they had ever done before."

The soul then goes on to relate the circumstances which caused its departure from the Rebbe's body.

"One evening," it says, "which happened to be the eve of the festival called 'Simchath Torah,' the Rebbe jumped and danced, according to his usual custom, round the 'Bimah' (reading platform) of his little synagogue, amidst the acclamations of his followers and devotees. As on many other previous occasions, he had then also drunk a quantity of intoxicating wine and

spirits, and felt exceedingly jolly and animated. In that pleasant mood he called out : ' Make room for all the saints of the Bible, who have just come here to rejoice with me on this joyful festival. Let me drink the health of Father Abraham and of the other patriarchs who accompany him.' And amidst his shouting and drinking he suddenly beheld a vision. It seemed to him that the walls of the Synagogue were turning round and round, and fearing lest he might fall to the ground, and his intoxicated state might become known to the bystanders, he quickly exclaimed : ' Come ye, my spiritual guests, Abraham, Isaac, and all the rest of you, and follow me to my own room. There we will have a sacred meeting, and discuss our secret affairs.' Saying which, he dragged himself into his own room, and locked and bolted the door behind him.

" When his devotees saw this, they said to each other : ' No one is like our Master, and no one can be compared to our holy Rebbe ; he is a perfect saint, the holy of holies to the letter. How have they all left paradise, those great and exalted personages of the Bible, and have come to his place of worship in order to rejoice with him in his pleasant company. Nay, before our very eyes he has spoken to them as a man speaks to his friends, and amidst jumping and dancing he addressed them in a most familiar way, and loudly toasted their health. Now, they are all assembled in his room where they are discussing certain matters concerning ourselves, such as our final release from bondage, and our return to Zion by the help of the Messiah. Our Rebbe will also succeed in subduing the powers of the evil spirit, Samael, with all the other legions of the evil spirits ; he will tread him under his feet, and will thus prevent him from doing us any harm.'

" While they were thus addressing each other, and their minds were occupied with the discussion of the Rebbe's doings, a boy rushed in breathlessly, and, amidst the greatest consternation, told all those present that he had just seen the body of the Rebbe lying lifeless on the ground behind the yard of his house. Thereupon all the Chassidim ran out, woe-stricken and terrified, and behold, there on a heap of refuse and mud close to the window of the Rebbe's room, lay his corpse, the dead body of the great saint. At the sight of which they all began weeping and lamenting, and said : ' Alas, on account of our own sins and transgressions of the Law that righteous man has died. The evil spirit Samael has overpowered him, and has thrown him through the window down into the yard.'

" But the real fact is—thus the soul concludes its narrative—that he had neither any quarrels with Satan nor any fight with the rest of the evil spirits. The evil spirit that caused his untimely death was of

quite a different nature. It was the spirit of wine and of other intoxicating drinks that had cut short his existence. For, after having on that eve partaken freely of some very strong potations, the Rebbe felt rather heavy and ill. He opened the window of his room, and leant out into the fresh air. No sooner had he done so than he lost his equilibrium, and fell headlong on the stones below. No immediate help being near at hand, he soon after expired."

There are several other passages in Erter's writings which treat most humorously of the same subject, but I shall only give one other short extract from one of his satires, having for its title, "Piety and Wisdom." After having pointed out in general terms the great advantages which the calling of a Rebbe offers, the author takes the young aspirant into his confidence, and describes to him its glorious prospects in the following words:—

"When," says he, "you are a 'holy man,' you will have a greater treasury than the king has, inasmuch as all the gold and silver belonging to your devotees who may live in your district will be yours. Any king or ruler of a land who wishes to levy taxes from his loyal subjects, is obliged to appoint and employ tax-collectors for that purpose, but your adherents will place all their money and wealth at your disposal without your solicitation. Should any of them become ill, money will be sent to you to offer prayers for their recovery. You keep, at any rate, those monetary presents, for if they die it will generally be assumed that their death was a punishment for their previous evil doings; but, if they are restored again to life and health, then that fact will be attributed to your effective prayers. The same will be the case when people come to you to obtain your advice in regard to business or matrimonial matters. If they are successful, and everything turns out to be according to their heart's desire, then it is you and your great Divine power that have effected all this; but, on the other hand, if your counsel and foresight have deceived them, they will have to ascribe their failure to their own follies and misdeeds."

Erter succeeded in infusing a new life and spirit into the Hebrew tongue, which is generally classed among the dead languages. To quote the words that he himself uses on behalf of the genius of the Hebrew language, "I am dead in the mouths of my children, but I live still in their hearts." Erter did more than merely

protest against the lack of originality in later Hebrew writers, for he himself supplied the deficiency that he had censured. But Erter was no mere writer of original Hebrew prose. He had the welfare of his Jewish countrymen constantly before his mind's eye, and it was with the object of improving their low and degraded mental and social state that he wrote those satires in which their shortcomings and follies were put forth and ridiculed. He spared no class; Rabbi and layman alike felt the sting of his scorn. He acted on the good old proverb, *Ridendo castigare mores*, and thereby really effected some good in the direction indicated. For some time he also edited, in co-operation with some other genial spirits, a Hebrew periodical under the name of *He-Chaluz* (החלוץ), which continued to appear after his death under the editorship of a friend. This journal was intended to promote enlightenment and learning among the Jews of Galicia, and gradually to win their sympathies for a project of Erter's, which was calculated to produce a vast amount of good to their children and future generations. He advocated the establishment of an agricultural colony in his own country, in which Jewish young men should be employed to till the ground and to farm tracts of land on their own account. This healthy and useful occupation, he maintained, would help to decrease, to a great extent, the misery and poverty, which are, even now, the characteristic features of that particular part of the Austrian Empire. And, strange to say, that very plan which was drawn up so many years ago by Erter without being carried into effect, has most recently been taken up again in the capital of Austria by the most influential members of the Jewish community of that city through the instigation of Baron Hirsch. Let us hope that it will soon be realised, and that the seed sown by the author of the *Ha-Zophe* will bear excellent fruit, "rejoicing God and men."

One word more, and my object to pay homage to the genius of a man of extraordinary talents may be attained.

If there be any fault to be found with the little work just named it consists in this, that the essays or satires it contains are too few in number. But it may safely be said that, in spite of their deficiency in quantity, they will outlive many a more voluminous work. True humour is a rare possession, and Erter's style will never cease to be a source of delight to those who have a relish for keen satire and for an elegant and poetical employment of the language of the Bible.

JOSEPH CHOTZNER.
